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Wilmington City Hall/Thalian Hall
102 N. Third Street
Wilmington
New Hanover County
North Carolina

HABS No. NC-7

PHOTOGRAPHS
WRITTEN HISTORICAL AND DESCRIPTIVE DATA

Historic American Buildings Survey
National Park Service
Department of the Interior
Washington, D.C. 20240

HISTORICAL AND ARCHITECTURAL DATA
CITY HALL AND THALIAN HALL

Prepared for America's City Halls Project
(US Conference of Mayors, American
Institute of Architects and US
Department of the Interior)

NAME: Wilmington City Hall/Thalian Hall

LOCATION: 102 N. Third Street
Northeast corner of the intersection of Third and Princess Streets,
Wilmington (New Hanover County), North Carolina

PRESENT OWNER: City of Wilmington

PRESENT OCCUPANT: City of Wilmington

PRESENT USE: Administrative Offices

SIGNIFICANCE: Wilmington City Hall/Thalian Hall has housed city government and community theater continuously since 1855. Designed by John Montague Trimble, the building is of restrained, neo-classical design with flamboyant Victorian Italianate details typical of Wilmington architecture of this period. Thalian Hall survives today as the best example of 19th Century theater architecture in North Carolina, and one of the few remaining examples in the nation. City Hall/Thalian Hall is listed on the National Register of Historic Places.

I. HISTORICAL INFORMATION

A. Physical History

1. Date of erection

- a. Commission minutes of June 21, 1855: Committee of the Mayor and a Commissioner appointed "to act in conjunction with the committee on the part of the Thalian Association to take all necessary steps for the erection of a Town Hall".
- b. Commission minutes of September 20, 1855: Bids were opened and contract in the amount of \$35,786 awarded to J.L. Kean and G.W. Rose.
- c. December 27, 1855: cornerstone laid for "Town Hall" in ceremonies conducted by the Masonic Fraternity of St. John's Lodge No. 1.
- d. Date of occupation by town offices unknown.
- e. First performance in Thalian Hall occurred in April, 1858.

2. Architect

- a. Commission minutes of August 14, 1854: Robert H. Cowan was appointed a committee of one to "procure plans and estimates for the erection of a suitable Hall upon said lot...." Said lot being 198 feet on Third Street and 200 feet on Princess Street, including the Old Theater Building, purchased the same date for \$9,500. Mr. Cowan was a member of the Commission.

- b. Commission minutes of December 28, 1854: Mr. Cowan reported that plan prepared by J.M. Trimble and Company, selected the previous October, had been amended as suggested. The amended plan was adopted, although the accompanying specifications were not adopted, as the Commission found them insufficient. Mr. Cowan, Donald McRae and the Magistrate of Police were then appointed as a committee "to whom the various plans and proposals for the building of the Town Hall and Lecture Rooms are referred, who shall consider said proposals severally, confer with the applicants for said contracts, and make report to the Board at their earliest convenience [and]...are instructed to consider any other plans which may be submitted to them".

Apparently the plan submitted by John M. Trimble and Company, as modified by the Commission, was used to build Town Hall/Thalian Hall. Known modifications include the addition of Classical Revival features, principally the western pediment and portico. The Trimble design showed a small Italianate portico similar to that on the Princess Street side serving as the theater entrance. (SOURCE: Thalian Hall History, Part II: Construction, 1854-1858, compiled by Isabel M. Williams, commissioned by Thalian Hall Commission, Inc.)

A copy of the original plans is believed to be in the cornerstone.

- c. Biographical data - John M. Trimble
Reference: Ashley W. Cole, John Montague Trimble, Architect and Builder of Theatres, 1815-1867, typescript (New York, 1943) located in the Library and Museum of the Performing Arts, The New York Public Library at Lincoln Center, New York.

3. Builder and Materials

- a. Commission minutes of December 8, 1855: The Building Committee reported that they had hired Mr. Post to supervise the work on Town Hall at the rate of \$4 per day.
- b. Contract between J.F. Post and the Town Commissioners executed on November 1, 1855. (SOURCE: Thalian Hall History, Part II: Construction, 1854-1858, compiled by Isabel M. Williams, commissioned by Thalian Hall Commission, Inc.)
- c. Biographical data: James Francis Post studied architecture in New York for five years; designed the first residence erected by John Jacob Astor in New York in 1840; came to Wilmington in 1849; designed or supervised construction of some of Wilmington's most significant buildings: City Hall/Thalian Hall, Bellamy mansion (5th and Market Streets, demolished), St. John's Church (uncertain), First Presbyterian Church (3d and Orange Streets, in use), New Hanover County Court House (3d and Princess Streets, in use), the US Post Office (Front and Chestnut Streets, in use), and most of the public schools built during this period.

- d. Design: Mr. Post is believed to have redesigned the Western portico, and added columns around the south face of the building, which were never constructed due to limited funds. He continued to be involved in repairs to the building after construction was completed, preparing estimates for repair as late as 1888.
 - e. Building materials: The structure is stucco over brick, scored and originally painted to simulate brownstone, then popular in New York City. (See Attachment for detail description.)
4. Original construction and alterations.
The original exterior or appearance of the building remains virtually unaltered from the original. The stucco is painted white and is no longer scored. The windows of Thalian Hall have been filled in. Exterior landscaping has been redesigned over the years.
5. Alterations and additions
The interiors of City Hall and Thalian Hall have been modified many times over the years. The known dates and plans are available from the Public Works Department, City of Wilmington.

B. Historical Context

1. City Hall

The Commissioners of the Town of Wilmington purchased land at Third and Princess Street for the purpose of constructing a Town Hall. The land was owned by Colonel James Innes who, in 1754, wrote a will which designated that the property be used after his wife's death to establish a free school for North Carolina youth. Innes Academy was eventually built on the property, including a theater for performing arts on the first floor. Around 1803, the land was apparently acquired for nonpayment of taxes, but prior ownership is somewhat cloudy due to dubious land dealings involving land confiscated from Tories during the Revolutionary War. The Academy's fortunes rose and fell during the ensuing years, but the building was continuously used for theatrical productions, apparently well-supported by the well-to-do populace. The need for a larger theater coincided with the need for a building to conduct public business. The Thalian Association came into ownership of the eastern portion of the block, and agreed to give title to the town, which would construct a suitable building for the town hall and a theater.

As construction was to get underway, disputes arose between the town and the Thalias over the size of the theater. The Commissioners' minutes of September 27, 1855 state:

"Whereas the parties to whom the erection of a Town Hall and Lecture Room was let now decline entering into a contract for the same on the terms offered, it is hereby Resolved-That the Committee are authorized to make other terms with them, or other parties or again advertise for proposals as in their judgement may seem best."

At a special meeting on October 18, 1855, the Commission delivered an ultimatum which apparently resolved the dispute:

"The communication from the Committee on the part of the Thaliens being under consideration

Resolved-That this Board cannot comply with the request of the Committee in the enlargement of the Lecture Room; but do not object to the enlargement provided the additional expense is not to be paid by the Town.

Resolved-That in the event of the Thalian Association declining to build a Lecture Room, according to the present plans (with the above amendment) that the building Committee be and are hereby authorized to purchase from them their interest in the land."

Dispute over ownership of the land continued until 1870, when Judge Edward Cantwell discovered that no deed had been filed on the transfer of the property to the Town, and corrected the oversight by registering a deed in 1870. Under that deed, the Library Association was evicted from two rooms on the north side. The Thalian Association had already renounced any claim to ownership, so the Town finally had clear title to the property. (SOURCE: Thalian Hall History, Part I: History of the Land, compiled by Isabel M. Williams, commissioned by Thalian Hall Commission Inc.)

The building has continuously housed local government offices since its construction. At various times, a ballroom was in use on the second floor for society gatherings. This area was later used as the library until 1966. At this writing, plans are underway to rearrange office assignments again, but without any major interior alterations, except to remove and rearrange some office partitions which are not original to the building.

2. Thalian Hall

Extensive documentation of history and use of Thalian Hall is available from a variety of sources. Best sources include:

- (1) Thalian Hall History, Parts I, II, III and IV, compiled by Isabel M. Williams (noted above).
- (2) Lewis T. Moore Collection, Local History Collection, New Hanover County Library.
- (3) Files of the Thalian Hall Commission Inc., filed in Thalian Hall.

II. ARCHITECTURAL INFORMATION

A. Description of Exterior

The architecture of City Hall combines features of the Italianate and Classical Revival styles. The building is L-shaped, measuring 170 feet on Princess Street and 100 feet facing Front Street, and 54 feet in height. The Italianate style is represented by the heavy projecting cornices supported on brackets, the pediments placed upon acanthus consoles, and round-headed arched windows featuring semi-circular arches, with a palladian-style window above the entrance. The Classical Revival portico, added to the Trimble design apparently by James F. Post, features four Corinthian-style pillars with elaborate capitals on the western face of the building.

The center bay of the five-bay front facade features a semi-circular arched doorway beneath a pair of elongated round-arched windows. Above the windows is a molded semi-circular relieving arch featuring a keystone, and resting on consoles. The tympanum of the arch features a simple blind oculus. The other four frontal bays feature the same double windows above simple double rectangular windows below. The end bays are flanked at the second floor level by coupled pilasters on the end of the facade. Along the south face of the building, the seven bays are less elaborate and lack keystones. All second floor bays are divided by Doric pilasters, with coupled pilasters marking the end of the facade. The entrance to Thalian Hall is off-center, flanked by three bays to the left and four to the right. The theater entrance has a one-story porch with four Corinthian columns supporting a full entablature, with a balustrade around the top. The exterior decoration is made primarily of cast iron.

The building is two stories with a partially submerged basement. The basement on the western face is accessible from street level. On the eastern face the basement is completely below ground level.

City Hall is constructed of brick masonry walls supporting wood floor and roof. The walls are 24-27 inches thick from the footings to the water table, 20-23 inches from water table to belt course, and 16-17 inches to the cornice. The soft burned common brick was laid using sand and lime mortar, one course headers to every seven courses of brick, and ranging in color from a pale red to medium red or shale brick. Stucco was applied directly to the brick and scored to appear as brownstone. The stucco is painted white presently. A molded water table marks the division of the basement and first levels, with a belt course between the first and second levels.

B. Description of Interior

The original interior has been subdivided to provide office space to meet the changing needs of the Administration. The original corridors, twenty feet in height, remain unchanged on the first floor. Office areas on the first floor have been divided to provide two levels within the original twenty-foot storey. The Council Chamber is the only room which retains nearly the original ceiling height, except for a sub-ceiling for light fixtures. The second floor has likewise been divided to create an attic level for storage.

The original interior walls are plaster applied directly to the exterior brick. The wood floors are overlaid with terrazzo flooring. Office partitions of more recent addition are made of sheetrock.

C. Site Description

The main building entrance faces west along Third Street. A separate theater entrance faces south onto Princess Street.

The south portion of the property is called Innes Park, a landscaped park-like area maintained by the City's Parks and Recreation Department. The park,

named for the original known property owner, features various types of native vegetation, including live oak, holly and azaleas, in addition to seasonal flowering shrubs.

PREPARED BY:

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City of Wilmington, North Carolina
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